

From the perspective of social identity theory: The interactive mechanism of in-group construction and out-group conflict among solo fans of idol groups-Taking Teens in Times as an Example

Dai Yingxi

Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau, 999078

dayingxics@163.com

ABSTRACT

In the context of the rapid development of the idol industry and the fan economy, the organizational characteristics of the fan groups within idol groups have become increasingly prominent. The internal identity construction and external group conflicts within these groups have also become major issues in the governance of online communities. This paper takes the fans of Teens In Times as the research object. Based on the social identity theory and intergroup threat theory, using the participatory observation method of network ethnography and combined with informal small interviews, it systematically explores the path of internal group construction among the fans, the manifestations of external group conflicts, and the types of perceived intergroup threats. Finally, it constructs an interactive mechanism of “internal group identity → perceived intergroup threat → intergroup conflict behavior tendency”. The research has found that fans construct exclusive internal group identity through three means: symbols, words, and collective behavior. The perception of inter-group threats serves as the key mediating factor for the transformation of internal group identity into conflict behavior. This finding can provide theoretical and practical references for deepening the localization application of social identity theory, regulating the behavior of fan communities, and creating a healthy online environment.

Keywords: Exclusive Fan Group; Internal Group Construction; Inter-Group Conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the widespread adoption of the Internet and the large-scale development of the idol industry, the fan base has evolved from a previously scattered group of individuals into a clearly defined and organized online community. Among them, the phenomenon of “only fans for idols” is particularly prominent^[1]. A “fan” specifically refers to a fan who only supports a certain member of a group and excludes other members and related groups. The core of this is a strong preference for the in-group and prejudice against the out-group. In recent years, conflicts over fan bases have occurred frequently, ranging from verbal disputes, data competition to extreme behaviors such as malicious reporting, which have disrupted the online order and also had an impact on the healthy development of the idol industry. Fans, in order to achieve self-identity and develop a strong sense of admiration for certain individuals, expect to obtain a sense of group belonging by participating in a specific group. That is, the value identification of the fan circle is not an abstract identification of a certain value; its essence lies in the sense of belonging that fans have to the social relationships within the fan circle^[2]. As a leading idol group, Teens In Times has a large number of fans and a complex structure. The conflict between fans and the group is typical, making it an ideal case for research. Therefore, this paper takes “fans” as the research object, and combines the theories of social identity and intergroup threat to explore the interactive mechanism between the construction of the internal group and the conflict with the external group. This not only enriches the application of theory localization, fills the research gap, but also provides theoretical and practical references for guiding rational fan-following, regulating fan behavior, and improving fan management.

2. THE EXCLUSIVE CONSTRUCTION PATH OF THE CORE FAN GROUP WITHIN THE TEENS IN TIMES

2.1 Symbolic System: Visual Identification and Emotional Connection of In-group Identity

Symbols are the main tool for identifying group identity. The “Only Fans” of Teens In Times have created a unique symbol system to define the boundaries between the inner and outer groups, thereby strengthening the sense of identity and

emotional connection among group members^[3]. The symbol system of the “Only Pink” brand mainly consists of exclusive symbols and derivative symbols. The specific details are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of Unique Symbol System and Related Explanations.

Symbol type	Concrete content	Functional role
Exclusive symbol	Support color, support slogan, exclusive nickname, personal badge, support item	Clarify the identity of the internal group, distinguish it from other fan groups, and strengthen the identification of the identity.
Derived symbol	Exclusive emojis, edited videos, fan-created text and images, support message templates	Strengthen emotional bonds, promote internal group interaction, and consolidate the internal group consensus.

The classification of the above symbol system is based on a 2-month online ethnographic observation of fields such as microblog sub-forums and fan communities, as well as the results of informal interviews with 8 “fan-only” individuals. The study found that “exclusive symbols” appeared most frequently and had the strongest normativity in the observation and interview scenarios, and were the basic symbols for identifying the identity of the “fan-only” group. While “derivative symbols” also appeared frequently, their main function was to “maintain emotional ties”. Therefore, this study divided them into two parts: “basic identification function” and “internal emotional maintenance”.

Exclusive symbols: Each member of the Teens In Times has their own exclusive symbol. Ma Jiaqi’s fan’s support color is moon white and star purple, and the support slogan is “Ma Jiaqi, let’s go to the future together”. Ding Chengxin’s fan’s support color is golden, and the support slogan is “Ding Chengxin, you are my light”. These exclusive symbols serve as the identity markers for the “Only Fans” group. They are frequently used on platforms such as Weibo sub-forums and fan groups, serving as the “secret codes” for members to recognize each other within the group. They also define the boundaries between this group and other groups of “Only Fans” or “Group Fans”, and possess a strong exclusivity^[4].

The use and dissemination of symbols are mainly carried out by the fan groups through posting content with exclusive symbols on social platforms, wearing support items, and participating in offline support activities, etc., to enhance the dissemination effect of the symbols^[5]. When significant events such as an idol’s birthday or the release of their work occur, the fans of the idol will use specific colors and slogans to release support content, and form a large-scale symbol display, strengthening the identity recognition of the group members and conveying the group’s stance of “I love only one”, thereby deepening the exclusivity boundaries between the internal group members.

2.2 Discourse system: Formation of internal group consensus and strengthening of group identity

Words are the carriers of group consensus. The “Only Fans” group of Teens In Times uses the establishment of an exclusive discourse system to form unified value judgments, regulate the behaviors of group members, strengthen internal group identity, and exclude the discourse logic of external groups^[6]. Its discourse system is divided into two types: internal communication discourse and discourse for distinguishing from external groups. This is manifested in the following aspects.

Exclusive discourse refers to a specific communication discourse system formed within a group by the fans. The exclusive evaluation discourse of the idol (such as “top tier”, “all-round ace”), the interaction language within the group (such as “Strange friends who like the same person”, “protecting treasures”, “collect money”), and the exclusive interpretation discourse of the idol’s works all belong to this system. These discourses not only reduce the communication costs within the group but also create a unified group consensus, “This idol is the best, only the fan group is the core supporters”. Through continuous repetition and reinforcement, group members develop a consistent value judgment and enhance their sense of group belonging.

The disciplining function of discourse is that the fan group uses discourse interaction to regulate the behaviors and viewpoints of its members, and excludes any remarks that contradict the group’s consensus^[7]. For instance, when a member expresses statements that recognize other members or support the fan base, they will be regarded as a “traitor” and will face criticism and exclusion. However, statements that uphold the idol and exclude other groups will be recognized. This further strengthens the exclusivity of the internal group, intensifying members’ preference for the internal group and their prejudice against the external group.

2.3 Collective Behavior: Cultivation of In-group Cohesion and Establishment of Action Boundaries

Collective behavior is the main way to enhance the cohesion of the internal group. The “Teens In Times” and its fans carry out a series of regular and exclusive collective activities to cultivate the sense of belonging among group members, determine the action boundaries of the internal group, and thereby strengthen the exclusive identity of the internal group [8]. As shown in the Table 2:

Table 2. Types of Collective Behavior of the Wei Fen Group and Related Explanations.

Behavior type	Concrete content	Effectiveness of the action
Conventional collective behavior	Data ranking, online support, resource fundraising, birthday celebration, work promotion	Strengthen group synergy, cultivate a sense of belonging, and enhance group cohesion
Exclusive collective behavior	Resisting the association of the idol with other members reporting negative remarks about the outside group and competing for exclusive resources related to the idol	Establish the boundaries of actions, strengthen exclusivity, and consolidate the identification of the in-group

Conventional collective behaviors, such as data ranking and online support, are the most common collective behaviors exhibited by the “only-fans”. The group members work together to complete activities like ranking, supporting, and fundraising, generating a strong sense of collaboration and belonging [9]. For instance, when preparing for a ranking competition, the members work together in a cooperative manner to ensure the idol’s ranking. During the birthday celebration, a unified support activity is carried out. Through such coordinated actions, the cohesion of the group can be strengthened, and the internal group identity can also be consolidated.

Exclusive collective behavior refers to the exclusivity of the fan group’s identity and discourse, and is also manifested in specific actions [10]. The “only fan” group will resist any content involving the idol and other members’ romantic relationships, refuse to participate in the group’s fan support activities, and will collectively report and refute negative comments from outside groups. In terms of resource allocation, they will compete for exclusive resources and exclude the participation of other groups. This exclusive collective behavior not only defines the action boundaries of the internal group but also strengthens the exclusivity identity of the internal group.

3. THE MANIFESTATIONS AND PERCEPTION OF INTERGROUP THREAT IN CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE ONLY FANS OF THE TEENS IN TIMES GROUP AND OTHER GROUPS

3.1 The main manifestations and typical event processes of intergroup conflicts

The external group targets of the “only fans” of the Teens In Times have a clear direction. They mainly include other members of the group’s fans, group fans, CP fans, and fans of celebrities outside the group. The manifestations of conflicts with different targets vary. As shown in the following Table 3 in detail.

Table 3. Presents a list of external conflict targets, manifestations, and core causes for the minority group.

Object of conflict	Main forms of expression	The core cause of the conflict
The other members of the group are all fans	Verbal disputes, data competition, resource contention, malicious defamation	Idol resource allocation, data ranking, competition for fan group status
The fans of the entire group	Discourse opposition, refusal to cooperate in support, reporting fan content	The concept of “keeping things balanced” held by the “group fans” conflicts with the stance of the “single fan” who “loves only one person”.

Table 3. (continued) Presents a list of external conflict targets, manifestations, and core causes for the minority group.

Object of conflict	Main forms of expression	The core cause of the conflict
CP fans	Resist CP content, report CP to the works, and express criticism.	The “bundled” interpretation style of CP fans and the “exclusive” demands of the “only-for-idols” faction clash with each other.
Fans of outside-of-the-group celebrities	Data competition, verbal attacks, malicious comparisons, and false accusations and defamation.	The competition in terms of the exposure, resources, and fan base of the idols

The main targets of the conflict are as shown in the above table. The external group conflicts of the “only fans” of Teens In Times are mainly among other members of the group, followed by the fans of the couple and the fans of the celebrity outside the group. The conflicts of the only fans of the celebrities outside the group are mostly of a temporary nature. Among the members of the group, conflicts occur most frequently among the fans. These conflicts are mainly caused by issues such as the distribution of idol resources and ranking of data, and the intensity of the conflicts is also relatively high.

The manifestations of the conflict are conflicts between the “fan base” and other groups, and both occur online. The main manifestations are verbal disputes, data competition, content reporting, and mutual defamation among groups on social platforms. Specifically, it includes making opposing remarks, competing for ranking and evaluation, reporting negative content, and fabricating rumors, etc. Some conflicts may spread across platforms, leading to large-scale group opposition.

The typical process of a conflict incident, taking the conflict between two members of Teens In Times as an example, is divided into four stages: the triggering stage, where dissatisfaction arises due to derogatory remarks or malicious ranking suppression; the escalation stage, where both parties engage in verbal attacks and organize reports and negative comments; the diffusion stage, where the conflict spreads across platforms and the number of participants increases; the cooling-off stage, where the conflict subsides, but the antagonistic emotions still exist, making it likely to trigger another conflict.

3.2 The types of inter-group threats perceived by fans and their emotional responses

According to the intergroup threat theory and the interview data, the perceived intergroup threats by the only fans of Teens In Times mainly include three types: real threat, identity threat, and cultural threat. The emotional responses triggered by different threat types also vary, as shown in the following Table 4.

Table 4. Types of Intergroup Threat Perceived by the Group-Oriented Perception and Emotional Responses.

Type of threat	Concrete content	Core emotional response
Real threat	The out-group competes for idol resources (such as endorsement deals, film and television opportunities), suppresses data, and influences the exposure of the idol	Anxiety, dissatisfaction, anger
Identity threat	The members of the out-group belittled the idol, denied the identity of the die-hard fans, and questioned the way these die-hard fans pursued their idols	Anger, resentment, resistance
Cultural threat	The fan-following concepts of out-group fans (such as the “group spirit supreme” of group fans and the “binding fan-following” of CP fans) are contrary to the concept of individual fandom	Rejection, aversion, resistance

The real threat is the most intense inter-group threat among fans, mainly caused by various competitions such as the allocation of idol resources and data rankings. During the interviews, many fans mentioned their fear that other fan groups would seize the idol resources, suppress the data, and hinder the idol’s development. Therefore, threats directly related to the core interests of the idol led to the fans’ anxiety, dissatisfaction, and anger, which were the causes of group conflicts.

Identity threat refers to the close connection between the identity of a fan and the identity of an idol. When an external group criticizes, denies or questions the idol, it directly impacts the self and the idol identity of the fans, causing feelings of anger, resentment and resistance. When group fans accuse the individual fans of being “selfish and destroying the group

spirit”, the individual fans will feel their identity being denied, and thus they will use words to refute and reject the group fans in order to maintain their own identity.

Cultural threat. The fan groups formed a kind of “single-fan worship, excluding others” star-worship culture. The concept of “group fan supremacy” and “CP fan binding worship” held by the group fans is contrary to this, thus generating a sense of challenge to culture and values, and subsequently leading to feelings of exclusion and resentment. In the interviews, many fans stated that they did not approve of the demands of the group fans and the interpretations of the CP fans, believing that they did not conform to their original intentions of star-worship and did not respect the idols. The cultural conflict further deepened the external group bias of the “single-fan” group.

4. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE INTERACTION MECHANISM BETWEEN THE INTERNAL GROUP OF THE MINORITY AND THE EXTERNAL GROUP CONFLICT

4.1 In-group identification is the prerequisite for intergroup threat perception

The internal group formation of the “only fans” of the Teens In Times is highly exclusive, which is the prerequisite for fans to perceive inter-group threats. Only the “fans” use three methods-symbols, words and collective actions-to define clear boundaries of their own inner group, generate a strong sense of belonging and identity, and distinguish themselves from various external groups. The strong sense of internal group identification causes fans to closely link their own interests with those of the internal group and the idol. They become more sensitive to any potential threats and even minor potential threats are magnified. Both are competitions for idol resources. However, fans who identify with the idol will view it as a real threat from an outside group, while group fans will see it as normal industrial competition. Therefore, it can be concluded that the higher the degree of in-group identification, the stronger and more intense the fans’ perception of inter-group threats will be.

4.2 Perceiving inter-group threats serves as the mediator for the transformation from internal group identification to inter-group conflict behavior

The perception of intergroup threats-especially real, identity, and cultural threats-plays a mediating role between in-group identity and conflict behaviors towards out-groups. When the “fan base” develops a strong sense of internal group identity, they will always prioritize the interests of the internal group and the idol. Once they sense any inter-group threats, they will experience negative emotional reactions such as anger and anxiety. Negative emotions will deepen the fans’ in-group preference and out-group prejudice, disrupt the internal interaction state, and cause the fans to shift from psychological identification to actual conflict behaviors. When they sense that resources are being contested, they will get involved in data competition and verbal disputes. When they feel that their idols are being belittled, they will defend their own identification with the idols by reporting or refuting. From this, it can be seen that without inter-group threat perception, internal group identification cannot turn into conflict behavior; it is precisely the link that connects the two.

4.3 The interactive framework of “in-group identification → perception of inter-group threat → tendency for inter-group conflict behavior”

Based on the previous analysis, this paper has constructed an interactive mechanism model among internal group identification, perception of intergroup threat, and tendency of intergroup conflict behavior. There is a progressive interactive relationship among these three factors, and they influence and reinforce each other. Only fans construct exclusive intra-group identities through symbols, words and collective behaviors. The greater the intensity, the more sensitive fans are to inter-group threats and the more diverse the types become. When fans perceive inter-group threats, they will experience negative emotional reactions, which in turn prompt them to have a tendency towards conflict behaviors and take specific actions. The emergence of intergroup conflict behaviors will further strengthen the exclusive identity of the in-group. The process in which group members collaborate to deal with the out-group will enhance cohesion and consolidate the group boundaries. This will enhance the internal group identification, make the group more sensitive to inter-group threats, and thus form a cyclic interaction logic. This framework clearly shows the internal mechanism of the exclusive fan group’s shaping and the conflict with the external group, and also explains the reasons for the frequent and long-lasting conflicts among the exclusive fans.

5. CONCLUSION

The core fans of the Teens In Times form a strong exclusive in-group identity through three means: symbols, words, and collective behaviors. These three elements work together to define the group boundaries and enhance the members’ sense

of belonging. The conflict between the insiders and the out-group is caused by three types of intergroup threats: reality, identity, and culture. Negative emotions are the key factor that transforms the threat into conflict behavior. There exists a progressive interactive process among in-group identification, perception of inter-group threats, and conflict behavior tendencies, which constitutes the main logic of conflict. Therefore, it is necessary to guide fans to develop a rational attitude towards idol worship. On social platforms, it is important to strengthen supervision over the idols and their management teams, establish communication channels, and enable the idols and management teams to reasonably allocate resources to promote the healthy development of the idol industry.

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